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Teaching History of the English Language with the Blickling Homilies

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"Teaching History of the English Language with the *Blickling Homilies*"

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The increasing digitization of medieval and early modern archives provides a wealth of materials for teaching with primary sources beyond printed textbooks. The growth of online manuscripts is especially a boon for presenting primary sources in facsimiles of their original forms for History of the English Language courses.[1] While a general textbook works to give students a sense of the overall scope of each period and the developments in the language—for this iteration of the course, I used the second edition of *The English Language: A Historical Introduction*, by Charles Barber, Joan C. Beal, and Philip A. Shaw—primary materials allow for examination of particulars. Working with primary texts like this leads to sustained, critical discussion about details of abstract concepts like Grimm's and Verner's Laws, dialects, the inflectional systems of Old and Middle English, multilingualism, and the linguistic implications of medieval handwritten orthography and modern printed texts.

One particular digitized manuscript that lends itself to studying various aspects of the history of English is the *Blickling Homilies* (Princeton University, Scheide Library MS 71), available via the Princeton University Digital Library. The website provides this description:

A composite manuscript consisting of three distinct parts. The main part consists of eighteen homilies in Anglo-Saxon [Old English] for Sundays and Saints' days from the feast of the Annunciation to that of St. Andrew. The homilies were written by two scribes in England probably in the late 10th or early 11th century. Nine preliminary leaves contain a Sarum Kalendar for use at Lincoln (15th century) and sequences of the Gospels (16th century), both in Latin. The manuscript was used in the administration of oaths to municipal officials at Lincoln. It contains extensive marginalia, much of it concerning city government.

Just as this codex contains significant witnesses to Old English (OE), it also contains more broad-ranging linguistic evidence with additions from Middle (ME) and Early Modern English (EModE). This description speaks to the trans-temporal and multilingual scope that this book offers for thinking about the history of English both synchronically and diachronically.

The vernacular sermons of the Blickling manuscript raise a number of themes to discuss in relation to Old English grammar, dialects, multilingualism, and modern editing. In one session of a course on the History of the English (in this case, a year-long graduate seminar), I presented the digital facsimile to the class via projector, along with a handout containing pages from Richard Morris's edition and translation of the Old English texts for comparison (homilies 7 and 13, discussed below). At this point in the course, students had already learned the foundations of reading Old English (using

Mitchell and Robinson with supplements from Hasenfratz and Jambeck), and were able to work out phonological pronunciations and translations of basic texts. Fortunately, sermons often present simple vocabulary and syntax appropriate for beginning reading of the language. We were able, therefore, to read out loud and translate several lines collaboratively in class. Along the way, we noted the workings of the case system, characteristics of various parts of speech, distinctive morphological features, and how the freedom of word order in a synthetic language allows for the types of rhetorical flourish significant for preachers. With both edited text and digital facsimile in front of them, students were able to see Old English in action, as well as practice their grammatical knowledge on a historical source.

The *Blickling Homilies* particularly reveal how significant dialects are for linguistic study of Old English. While these texts were not likely composed by a single author—and there must be versions behind those in the Blickling manuscript—they depict linguistic updating as the scribes copied the sermons. They are generally West Saxon in character, but copied from Mercian originals; on top of this, the differences between scribal habits and other dialectal features point to the multiple forms of Old English at work in these texts. Looking beyond this specific manuscript, a similar point can be made by comparing other iterations of texts in later witnesses; for example, it is useful to compare a passage of Blickling number 17 with a mid-eleventh-century version in Oxford, Bodleian Library, Junius 85 + 86 (cf. Morris 41; and Scragg 308):

Blickling: *7 gif we þæt nu ne doþ, þonne wyrce we us myccle synne on þon.*
Junius: *7 gif ge þæs alatigeað, þonne wyrceað ge eow synne on þon.*

Thus, forms of these texts as in the Blickling and Junius manuscripts demonstrate how earlier compositions were taken over and linguistically updated by scribes copying them, as well as the implications of looking at specific witnesses to texts across the Old English corpus. These are important points for considering manuscript witnesses before the age of print encountered later in the course.

In addition to dialect diversity, the *Blickling Homilies* also represent the multilingualism characteristic of medieval England. As new work has invigorated the field,[2] room has opened up for considering the history of English as one of linguistic diversity rather than a monolithic mother tongue. In the *Blickling Homilies*, this is particularly enacted through the interplay between Old English and Latin. The sermon for the Assumption of Mary (Blickling 13) offers one useful example. Multilingualism is apparent right at the start of this text, as its title in the manuscript (but not in Morris 137) is given as "Sancta Maria Mater Domini" ("Saint Mary, Mother of the Lord"). Within the sermon, the first sustained shift in language is the incorporation of a quotation (from the sermon's Latin source) reporting Mary's blessing to God, "Benedico nomen tuum et laudabile in secula seculorum" ("I bless your praiseworthy name forever and ever"; Morris 139). Immediately following the Latin, we find the author's translation into English, "Ic bletsige þinne þone halgan naman, forþon þe he is mycel & hergendlic in worlda world" (I bless your holy name, because it is great and

praiseworthy, world without end"; Morris 139). Other similar occurrences appear throughout this text, as the author vacillates between the Latin original and vernacular translation for the audience. Yet, in the manuscript, there are no obvious indications of linguistic changes. While Morris italicizes the Latin to offset it in his edition, the paleography on the page is no different for Latin than the English. For the multilingual author, this code-switching was fluid, both languages interconnected and inextricably part of the linguistic culture of early England. In thinking about multilingualism represented in these ways, students also raised questions about language acquisition, relevant for thinking about institutions, education, and structures for learning Latin in Anglo-Saxon England as well as our own endeavors in acquiring working knowledge of past forms of English.

Comparison with Morris's edition also points toward how modern standardization in print can affect our ideas about the language of the past. In such comparisons, students quickly spot differences of capitalization, word division, and punctuation. While we often take these for granted when looking at primary sources in editions, printed texts do not do justice to the nuances of language study in and with the medieval period. Offering students the ability to discuss the differences sparks productive conversations about our assumptions about language and the ways in which medieval manuscripts problematize our views—causing us to question perspectives

based on our modern uses of English and how those are linked to the standardizing power of print.

Finally, considering later medieval additions to the Blickling manuscript only enhance notions of dialect mixing, linguistic updating, and developments in English up through the fifteenth century. As already mentioned, this manuscript contains many later additions, including Middle and Early Modern English as well as Latin. While many of the additions are the names of civil servants, even these provide onomastic information relevant to the history of English. For example, "Thomas Archer" on folio 103v and "Martin Mason" on folio 119v attest to occupational nouns used for surnames in the late medieval period and held over into the early modern. Tracing etymologies for these surnames reveals further linguistic pathways. The word *archer* was adopted into English from Anglo-Norman (from Old French *archier*, derived from Latin *arcarium*) in the late thirteenth century, first attested in written sources around 1300. Similarly, *mason* also entered English around the same time, from Anglo-Norman forms *maciun*, *machoun*, and *mascun* (from Latin, with forms *macio*, *machio*, *mazo*, *mazunus*, and *maso*), with early attestations around 1275-1300. Even more intriguing, *Mason* must have been in use in England as a surname even earlier, since we find Johannes Macun from 1125-30 and Alanus le Mascun from 1201, as well as others up through the fourteenth century.[3] Again, multilingualism plays a

role, since this emphasizes the heavy flow of terms from French into English in the high medieval era.

Given that the *Blickling Homilies* is just one of many recently digitized Old English manuscripts, the exercise presented here is just one way in which medieval texts may be consulted in the History of the English Language. At other points in the course, we also spent time examining other manuscripts in facsimile: the single survivor of the *Ormulum* (Oxford, Bodleian Library, Junius 1) with Orm's idiosyncratic orthography; the Ellesmere *Canterbury Tales* (San Marino, Huntington Library, EL 26 C 9) to get a look at late Middle English; and the Winchester Malory (London, British Library, Additional 59678) in comparison with Caxton's early printing of *Le Morte d'Arthur*. In all of these canonical examples, the materiality of the text intersects with linguistics. By focusing on the *Blickling Homilies*, students were able to see how non-canonical literature in its manuscript setting also contributes to our knowledge of English throughout the medieval period.

Endnotes

[1] I originally offered some brief thoughts on this subject in a blog post, "What Have Manuscripts To Do With HEL?"; this is a modified and expanded version of preliminary ideas presented there.

[2] See, for example, essays in Tyler; and Jefferson and Putter.

[3] See entries for "archer" and "mason" in the *OED Online*; as well as "archer" and "masoun" in the *Middle English Dictionary*.

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